United Nations A/AC.198/2002/3

General Assembly

Distr.: General
12 February 2002

Original: English

Committee on Information
Twenty-fourth session
22 April-2 May 2002

United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations (2001)

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report describes activities carried out by the Department of Public Information to promote the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations (2001) and publicize the findings of the Group of Eminent Persons appointed by the Secretary-General for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.

02-24993 (E) 210202

I. Introduction

1. In paragraph 22 of its resolution 56/64 B of 24 December 2001, the General Assembly expressed appreciation for the Secretary-General's initiatives in promoting 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. Mindful of the importance of drawing international attention to the impact that dialogue among civilizations could have on promoting mutual understanding, tolerance and peaceful coexistence, the Assembly encouraged the Secretary-General to intensify the promotional campaign through the use of as many broadcasters and languages, in addition to the official languages, as possible, to spread coverage, with special emphasis on publicizing the findings of the Group of Eminent Persons for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.

2. In designing a promotional campaign to implement the General Assembly mandate, developed in coordination with the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, the Department of Public Information considered the observance of the Year an opportunity to emphasize the role of dialogue as a means to remove threats to peace and strengthen interaction among civilizations. In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States of America, this interaction acquired a new meaning and the need to promote dialogue among civilizations took on an urgency never felt so strongly before. As the Secretary-General pointed out in his report on the Year to the General Assembly at its fifty-sixth session, "A dialogue among civilizations is not only a necessary answer to terrorism — it is in many ways its nemesis" (A/56/523, para. 19).

3. In order to facilitate extensive public participation in this interaction, the Department of Public Information worked in close partnership with Member States and forged a broad coalition involving non-governmental organizations, educational institutions and private sector bodies. This enabled the Department to address cross sections of the international audience and produce well-targeted products.

II. Building partnerships, spreading the messages

A. Outreach related to the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations

4. To promote the concept of dialogue and the observance of the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 53/22 of 4 November 1998, initial efforts of the Department of Public Information were focused on developing the key messages of the Year in a way which made them both clear and accessible to people from different countries and cultures. As a means of achieving this objective, a series of promotional products, such as brochures, posters, public service announcements and a press kit, was developed and widely distributed.

(a) The underlying message of the Year — that diversity is a universal virtue and the peoples of the world are far more united by their common fate than they are divided by their separate identities — was articulated by the Secretary-General and his Personal Representative for the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations in several speeches delivered during the Year. In addition to posting them on the United Nations web site, copies of the speeches were widely distributed through the United Nations information centres. A guest editorial, penned by the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General and published in the newsletter of the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service, was addressed specifically to the community of non-governmental organizations;

(b) To illustrate how individuals, when faced with conflicts that create seemingly insurmountable walls between people, can keep alive the spirit of dialogue, the Department of Public Information produced seven 60-second public service announcements and made them available to television networks worldwide. Each public service announcement illustrated how a specific individual had crossed the divide of difference to bring people together. A brochure and a poster, produced in English, French and Spanish, were also made available through the United Nations information centres. With the help of several private sector organizations, a special web site was created in the six official languages which, in addition to posting information related to the Year,

provided a forum for person-to-person on-line dialogue;

(c) A bilingual (English/French) press kit was produced in advance of the plenary meetings of the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly dedicated to the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. The contents of the press kit — in the six official languages — were posted on the United Nations web site and electronically distributed through the United Nations information centres;

(d) The Department arranged several media events at United Nations Headquarters to highlight the ongoing work of the General Assembly in support of the Year. Following the adoption of Assembly resolution 55/254 of 31 May 2001 on the protection of religious sites, a press conference was arranged with several world religious leaders in attendance. In an event arranged in association with a writers' organization, a group of internationally acclaimed poets gathered at Headquarters to discuss "dialogue through poetry". Over 100 poetry readings were arranged worldwide by the organization under the same banner. The Department also supported an international essay-writing competition on the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, arranged by Seton Hall University, in the United States of America;

(e) The network of United Nations information centres reported over 200 activities in support of the Year, often carried out in close cooperation with local partners. Examples include activities of the United Nations information centres in Athens (radio interview), Harare (live call-in programme), Rabat (special supplement in a local national daily) and Sydney (exclusive newspaper interview). Press conferences and media events were organized to introduce the Year and its messages by the United Nations information centres in Brussels, Mexico City, Moscow, Sydney and Tehran. The United Nations Information Centre in Dakar organized a week-long celebration of the Year, which included an official ceremony, an exhibition and a public conference at the University of Dakar. Innovative information products connecting the observance of the Year with local concerns were developed by the United Nations Office in Minsk (table calendar), the United Nations Office in Tashkent (wall calendar and poster) and the United Nations Information Centre in Rome (CD-ROM). Working closely with national authorities, the United Nations Information Centre in Lisbon and the United Nations Information Centre in Rabat helped issue special postage stamps on the Year. In association with non-governmental organizations and local authorities, seminars and discussion meetings on the Year and its underlying messages were organized by the United Nations Information Centres in Dhaka, Moscow and Rabat.

B. Group of eminent persons for the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations

5. The work of the Group of Eminent Persons for the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, appointed by the Secretary-General to prepare a book on the issue of dialogue under the overall guidance of his Personal Representative for the Year, was considered crucial by the Department of Public Information in promoting the Year and generating greater international debate on redefining diversity as an opportunity, rather than a threat.

(a) To introduce the panel members and their work, the Department issued a press release and later posted their biographical notes on the United Nations web site. A brochure outlining the task before the panel was produced in English, French and Spanish and widely distributed by the information centres;

(b) An executive summary of the publication of the Group of Eminent Persons, entitled "Crossing the Divide", was issued in the six official languages in advance of the plenary meetings of the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly dedicated to the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. To introduce the summary and launch a press kit for the Year, the Department arranged a press conference at Headquarters, which was addressed by the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for the Year. The Department arranged a briefing for a group of visiting journalists from developing countries at Headquarters, where key findings of the publication were presented by the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General;

(c) Shortly after the presentation of the publication, United Nations Radio interviewed Professor Sergey Kapitza, a member of the Group of Eminent Persons, on the Group's findings. Separate interviews on the same subject were also conducted with the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General;

(d) Copies of the publication of the Group of Eminent Persons, received through a private sector partner, were distributed to the media and non-governmental organizations. The Department also arranged for the publication to be distributed at Headquarters through its bookstore and other regular channels. A German-language version of the publication, sponsored by the Government of Germany, was promoted and distributed by the United Nations Information Centre in Bonn.

C. Plenary meetings of the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly dedicated to the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations and follow-up activities

6. With the year-long build-up for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations culminating in the plenary meetings of the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly (8 and 9 November 2001), the Department of Public Information mobilized all available resources to publicize the meetings and raise global awareness about the challenges presented by the Year.

(a) At a press briefing held on the eve of the meetings, the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations met with members of the international media based at Headquarters. He was joined by several members of the Group of Eminent Persons;

(b) The plenary meetings were broadcast live by United Nations television and webcast in real time through the United Nations web site. Press releases covering each session of the two-day plenary were issued in English and French;

(c) At a briefing for non-governmental organizations held at Headquarters, the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General discussed the outcome of the plenary meetings and outlined the next steps before international civil society. The outcome of the year-long campaign for a dialogue among civilizations was also debated at a student conference, held at Headquarters, in which students from several countries, including Canada, Egypt, Mexico and the United States of America, participated via videoconference;

(d) At a special event held at the National Arts Club in New York in January 2002, the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for the Year was joined by the Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations to discuss how dialogue among civilizations could serve as a tool in the struggle against terrorism;

(e) The theme of dialogue as a tool for building a culture of peace and non-violence in the world will also be highlighted at an event in New York in March 2002 under the banner of "dialogue through poetry". The interim head of the Department of Public Information will be one of the speakers at this event;

(f) In a follow-up to the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, the United Nations Information Centre in Harare, in association with local authorities and non-governmental organizations, is planning to hold an international seminar with the participation of experts from various countries in May/June 2002.

III. Conclusions

7. The observance of the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations in 2001 and the issuance of the publication of the Group of Eminent Persons, entitled "Crossing the Divide", have provided the Department of Public Information with a foundation on which to carry on the dialogue among various groups in society at all levels, from local and national to international. The United Nations continues to remain the true home of the dialogue among civilizations. Through the continued promotion of dialogue in all parts of the world, the Department of Public Information hopes to contribute to the creation of lasting peace within and between civilizations, cultures and groups.